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ABSTRACT

The author, who is the President of Miami-Dade Community College (MDCC), Florida, argues that the fundamental purpose of MDCC is to preserve democracy. MDCC's open-door policy makes it possible for those who might otherwise be excluded from higher education to gain a college education, which then makes it possible for them to become active, committed, and productive citizens. MDCC is a multi-campus urban community college with more than 130,000 credit and non-credit students and nearly 800 full-time faculty members. The student body is 84% minority, and almost 70% of students are part time. In 1994, MDCC formally initiated a service-learning program. The program is now an internally funded college-wide infrastructure that includes three comprehensive "Centers for Community Involvement," a district director, three campus coordinators, faculty coordinators, part-time coordinators, 12 community Federal Work Study student assistants, student ambassadors, more than 150 community partners, thousands of students and hundreds of faculty, and myriad other community engagement projects. Since 1994, more than 200 faculty and 13,000 students have been involved in course-related service projects. The project's development was inspired by the Campus Compact Service-Learning Institute at Brown University. This paper includes key components of the program, lessons learned, and challenges, which include the labor-intensive nature of teaching in a service-learning format. (Author/NB)

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Fulfilling our Mission: Service-Learning at Miami-Dade Community College

By Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón
President, Miami-Dade Community College

ED 473 292

"We [higher education] educate a large proportion of the citizens who bother to vote, not to mention most of the politicians, journalists, and news commentators. We also educate all the school administrators and teachers, who in turn educate everyone at the pre-college level. And we do much to shape the pre-college curriculum through what we require of our college applicants. In short, not only have we helped create the problems that plague American democracy, but we are also in a position to begin doing something about them. If higher education doesn't start giving citizenship and democracy much greater priority, who will?"

Alexander Astin, professor and director of the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA on the unparalleled power higher education has to strengthen American democracy (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 10/6/95)

Our Commitment to Preserving Democracy

If you were to ask what Miami-Dade Community College does, I would reply that our fundamental purpose is to preserve democracy. We make it possible for thousands of people to gain a college education, people who would otherwise be excluded from higher education, and their education makes it possible for them to become active, committed, and productive citizens. Miami-Dade Community College maintains an open door policy to all who want to further their education, buttressed by a firm belief in every student's right to succeed. We believe that we are the "people's college," and that we play a vital role in preserving our American way of life, our democracy, and the individual visions of freedom that our country's name evokes for so many. We believe that every single individual who wants to attend college should have the opportunity to do so, and we couple that with a commitment to providing them the guidance and structure they need to not only attend but to also succeed.

If one has any doubt that America remains a place seen by many throughout the world as

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"the place," we invite you to sit in on one of our classes where 15 countries are represented in a class of 30 students. Come and hear these students describe their personal dreams for the future or listen to their stories of family sacrifice that make it possible for them to be here studying at our American college. Freedom and democracy take on a very different meaning when we are confronted with the realities presented by stories such as these. In short, we take our responsibility for "preserving democracy" very seriously, and this may partially explain the development of service-learning over the last six years. This chapter will provide an overview of how Miami-Dade Community College developed one of the largest and most successful service-learning programs in the nation—including sharing our lessons learned, challenges, and successes so that others may build upon our experience.

History and Philosophical Underpinnings

M-DCC is a large, multi-campus, urban community college with six campuses, more than 130,000 students (credit and non-credit), and nearly 800 full-time faculty members. Miami-Dade County provides a rich and diverse setting for the college. More than fifty distinct ethnic groups can be found in the county, and the campuses range from the urban Medical Center Campus that specializes in health career education to the Homestead Campus—a rural campus in far south Miami-Dade County. The sizes of the campuses range from several thousand to more than fifty thousand students. The student body is diverse (84 percent minority), almost 70 percent attend on a part-time basis, and approximately 80 percent of incoming freshman must take at least one remedial course. The challenges facing our faculty members and students are many. However, M-DCC is known as an institution of higher education committed to innovative teaching with a high priority placed on student learning. In short, M-DCC believes in doing what's right to further the education of its students.

Six years ago service-learning was relatively unknown and undeveloped at M-DCC. Although individual faculty members at Miami-Dade Community College had used community service experiences to enhance their courses for more than twenty years without calling it service-learning, these efforts were not the norm and occurred with little fanfare and without the benefit of a supportive infrastructure. This began to dramatically change in 1994 when the college formally initiated a service-learning program. Starting with just a handful of faculty, students, and community partners, we have, over the last six years, created an internally-funded, college-wide infrastructure that includes three comprehensive "Centers for Community Involvement," a district director, three campus coordinators, faculty coordinators, part-time coordinators, 12 community service Federal Work Study student assistants, student ambassadors, more than 150 community partners, thousands of students and hundreds of faculty, and myriad other community engagement projects. In fact, during this period, more than 200 M-DCC faculty have utilized service-learning, involving more than 13,000 students in course-related service projects. These students have contributed more than 280,000 hours of service to approximately 500 agencies in South Florida. It has been a truly amazing journey that mirrors the growth and acceptance of service-learning on a national level.

This journey began when M-DCC sent a team to a Campus Compact Service-Learning Institute at Brown University in the summer of 1994. The institute, facilitated by leaders of the service learning movement from around the nation, inspired the M-DCC team's desire and commitment to make service-learning part of the college. Upon their return, they worked with college leaders to prepare and submit a three-year grant to the Corporation for National Service designed to help the college build a sustainable service-learning program. This grant was one of 65 funded by the Corporation for 1994-1997. When this first three-year cycle of grant funding

ended, M-DCC received another three-year grant from the Corporation that ended in August 2000. This support from the Corporation for National Service, coupled with significant cash and in-kind college resources, helped M-DCC build a foundation for service-learning.

The first challenge M-DCC faced was to define what we meant by service-learning. Our *Faculty Guide to Service-Learning*, defines service-learning as "...the process of integrating volunteer community service combined with active guided reflection into the curriculum to enhance and enrich student learning of course material." The faculty member uses service as the vehicle for students to reach their academic objectives by integrating teaching/learning objectives with community needs. We also made a conscious decision to focus on three areas as we developed our program. First, service-learning demands sound academically anchored partnerships. The nature of the partnership between the college and any community agency must be based on a shared commitment to the student's education. Second, service-learning requires that the service assignment be driven by community needs. It is essential for community agencies to identify the needs of their constituents and the service opportunities for students. Third, service-learning must include a faculty-led reflection component. It is essential that the faculty member develop the skills necessary to teach students to harvest the learning available through their service experience. In fact, the most important aspect of a service-learning course is the reflection component.

Reflection has been defined as the intentional, systematic processing of the service experience to accomplish rational harmony. Rational harmony is the result of the individual cognitive development of each student. The developmental psychologist William Perry labels the acquisition of new information either "assimilation" or "accommodation." He purports that assimilation occurs when one simply places new information into his or her knowledge base

without processing it. The information does not result in any change in the individual's thinking or actions. On the other hand, accommodation requires the operation of consciously processing new information to fit into one's present thinking. This almost always results in individual change. Without this process, we run the risk of the student never truly learning from the experience. In short, true cognitive development and learning occur only when accommodation takes place, and reflection greatly enhances the probability for this to happen.

In fact, since community service experiences often produce conflicting emotions and cognitive dissonance in our students, faculty members are presented with rich opportunities to foster student learning. Rogers (1980) writes, "If a person's attitudes toward, reactions to, and feelings about the challenge s/he has experienced are facilitated with support, feedback, and integration, then the probability of achieving accommodation is increased." The key is the support the student receives which integrates the experience into the course constructs. With the faculty member's help, each student begins to realize the benefits of service-learning as he or she resolves internal conflicts regarding the personal and community issues brought out by the service-learning experience. Furthermore, the student begins to comprehend his or her place in the context of community responsibility. For as Silcox (1983) writes, "Meaningful service is not about doing good to someone, it is about the dignity and growth of the giver and receiver." To sum up, M-DCC requires an active involvement in the learning process from faculty, student, and community members as we connect real-life issues with course theory and context.

Description of M-DCC's Program

Figure 1 shows the organizational structure of M-DCC's Center for Community Involvement. The Center oversees all service-learning and America Reads activities, and coordinates myriad community outreach initiatives. The Center for Community Involvement is

housed in the Academic Affairs side of the college with the academic deans providing primary direction and support. Each of our three largest campuses has a Center for Community Involvement that is staffed by a full-time professional staff member and a host of part-time employees. These Centers provide outreach to M-DCC's other three campuses so that all six campuses are involved in service-learning, America Reads, and other Center activities. Some of the key service-learning activities of these Centers include:

- Faculty development and support—the role of the Center is to recruit, train, and support faculty. The Center offers regular workshops and follow-up sessions for faculty (service-learning 101, reflection techniques, service-learning and civic responsibility, faculty discussion sessions, etc.), and handles all logistics related to service-learning—class presentations, agency partnerships, student placements and monitoring, problem solving, recognition (certificates and thank you letters), data gathering, reporting, and evaluation. In essence, the role of the Center is to take care of the many logistics associated with service-learning so that faculty can focus their energies on connecting students' service experiences with course content.
- Faculty leadership—our Academic Deans each provide a small stipend to a "Service-learning Faculty Coordinator." This faculty member serves as an advocate of service-learning with other faculty and administration, guards academic integrity by helping faculty develop and implement service-learning in their classes, and serves as an advisor to the Center.
- Agency partnerships—the Center builds and maintains partnerships with approximately 150 community agencies that serve as "approved service-learning placements" for M-DCC students. Detailed information about these agencies and the service-learning opportunities they offer are maintained in a listing that is updated and disseminated each semester. In order to be included in this list of approved agency placements, the contact person must attend a 2.5

hour agency supervisor workshop and complete a "Letter of Understanding." The Center also visits agencies, contacts them regularly concerning student status, helps them solve problems they encounter (i.e., a student who is not showing up), evaluates their satisfaction, and invites agency partners on campus each term for a Service-Learning Fair.

- Program coordination—in addition to the College-wide Director and a full-time Coordinator, each Center is also staffed by a part-time campus coordinator and a number of Community Service Federal Work Study (FWS) student assistants. The Center coordinates every aspect of service-learning to ensure efficient and effective operation. These activities range from preparing the agency lists, to distributing and collecting student forms (application, placement confirmation, hour log, and evaluation questionnaire), to maintaining a database of all student and faculty involvement, to sending thank you letters and certificates, to counseling students about which agency to choose, and many other activities.
- Forums on Civic Responsibility—each semester the Center organizes several campus-wide Forums on Civic Responsibility that bring students and faculty together to examine the meaning of civic responsibility and how it relates to service-learning and their role as citizens in a democratic society. We have found this to be a very effective means of more purposefully fostering this essential goal of service-learning.
- Taste of Service events—each semester the Center organizes several college-wide service projects that provide faculty and staff the opportunity to enjoy the fellowship and goodwill that comes from service. Taste of Service events are held on a Saturday morning and include lunch and a group reflection session. Habitat for Humanity, coastal cleanups, and nursing home visits are examples of the kinds of projects selected.
- Student Ambassadors—students who excel in service-learning are given the opportunity to

apply to be student ambassadors. These students volunteer several hours a week helping coordinate service-learning activities and providing direct support to faculty and students. For example, ambassadors make class presentations, call students to check-in, present at workshops, and help advocate for service-learning on their campus. Each student receives a $250 stipend for their efforts.

From Unfamiliarity to a Fully Funded College-wide Program—Key Components & Lessons Learned

So how did Miami-Dade Community College move from no service-learning program at all in 1994 to a sustained, comprehensive college-wide infrastructure that supports hundreds of faculty and thousands of students each year? Some of the most significant factors that led to our success are described below.

Administrative Support and Leadership—obviously, the approval and encouragement of the college administration are critical for an initiative of this type to succeed. From the beginning, the college provided significant cash and in-kind resources to support service-learning, including money to hire program coordinators, space to establish the Centers, and encouragement to forge ahead.

Support from the Corporation for National Service—this support, beginning in 1994 gave us the opportunity to experiment and the impetus to strategically work to create an institutionalized service-learning program. Corporation support also connected M-DCC to the national service-learning movement and all the experience and resources it had to offer.

Support from the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) & Campus Compact—Campus Compact, from the beginning of our program, has provided a national voice, encouragement, resources, and powerful advocacy for the service-learning movement. They also

have regularly hosted service-learning conferences and workshops that helped create a cadre of service-learning experts at M-DCC. AACC has also been an invaluable resource for M-DCC's service-learning efforts by very effectively advocating for service-learning in community colleges and by working tirelessly to demonstrate service-learning's effectiveness and by disseminating a host of resource materials.

Visionary leadership from a core of committed faculty and administrators—success often results when a small group of committed individuals set their minds on a goal and work to make their dream a reality. The original M-DCC team that went to the Campus Compact Service-Learning Institute in 1994 included a dynamic administrator and a highly-respected faculty member who returned to the college and dedicated themselves and their talents to making service-learning a part of the college—grant writing, faculty recruitment and training, advocacy, strategic planning—they did it all.

Since our formal program began in 1994, some 13,000 student and 200 faculty participants later, we have learned a great deal about developing and sustaining service-learning at an institution of higher education. Some of the most important of these lessons include the following:

✓ **Set and maintain standards** – clearly differentiate service-learning from volunteerism and internships and emphasize academic rigor—academic credit for demonstrated learning, not for hours of service provided—faculty must very purposefully and rigorously use reflective assignments to guide and assess learning,

✓ **Reflection, reflection, reflection** – without reflection, there is no service-learning, when reflection is understood and utilized, service-learning is successful,

✓ **Faculty coordinator/leadership** – faculty listen to other faculty—having a respected,

knowledgeable faculty member to champion service-learning is invaluable in recruiting and supporting others,

✓ **Faculty training/workshops/support** – faculty need training in the pedagogy of service-learning so they can understand what it is and how to use it effectively, and they need support to handle the logistics of placing and monitoring students in service-learning projects,

✓ **Customer service** – the Service-Learning Center must provide outstanding customer service to all stakeholders to be successful—faculty, students, and agency partners alike,

✓ **Infrastructure is key** – in order for service-learning to become a widely utilized teaching strategy, there must be space and staff allocated to coordinate and administer the program,

✓ **Student leadership/student ambassadors** – there is nothing more powerful than student voices; utilize students as leaders, coordinators, and advocates for service-learning,

✓ **Utilize Community Service FWS to help coordinate program** – 7% of all Federal Work Study funds must be utilized for "community service" — coordinating a college's service-learning program is an approved use for these students. Student assistants can handle much of the logistics involved with placing and supporting service-learners,

✓ **Document and evaluate** – gather data on all program activities to demonstrate accomplishments and to constantly improve program,

✓ **Quality vs. quantity** – it is more effective to start small and maintain program quality than to grow too quickly,

✓ **Market, celebrate, and recognize** – say thanks to all program participants for their hard work and let college administrators and the community know the excellent services being provided,

✓ **Hold mandatory agency workshops** – agency supervisors generally are unfamiliar with service-learning and require training to ensure that they help students both serve and learn,

✓ **Foster support of administration** – administrative support is required to make service-learning work. Administrators need to be consulted and involved from the beginning.

Challenges

Certainly, there have been and continue to be challenges associated with building and sustaining a service-learning program. Helping faculty understand the service-learning pedagogy and the concept of reflective teaching takes much hard work and constant support. Managing the complex logistics and workload of a service-learning program can be labor intensive. Maintaining partnerships with large numbers of community agencies is difficult because of the high turnover among volunteer coordinators. Each semester a significant number of our service-learning contacts change, making our regular agency workshops and placement list revisions very important. Another challenge is finding resources to fund the program in an age of competing demands and limited funding. At Miami-Dade Community College we have worked hard to overcome challenges like these to the greatest extent possible, and our program continues to evolve and improve as we gain even more experience and expertise.

Conclusion

Miami-Dade Community College is proud of our commitment to service-learning and of the fact that we are part of an extremely important national educational movement that has been proven effective and is here to stay. Alexander Astin's challenge to higher education to introduce a renewed focus on democracy and citizenship is one that must be acted upon. In South Florida, and certainly in many communities around the nation, we are facing a worrisome decline in civic participation. There is less of a sense of common identity, less commitment to a

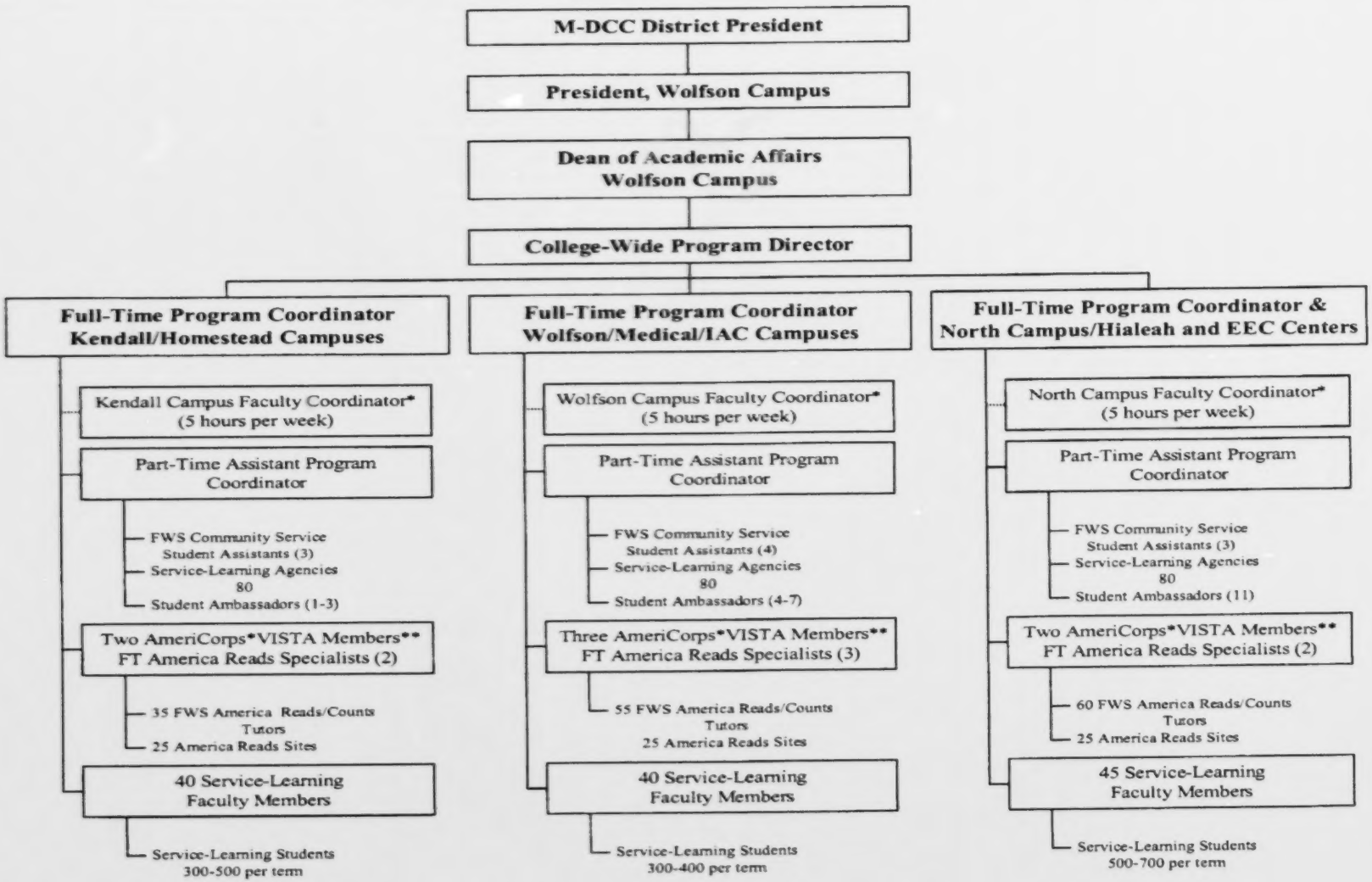
collective vision that is centered in civic or political purposes, and our communities are faced with unprecedented challenges. Higher education is uniquely positioned to effectively and significantly respond to our society's need for civic and democratic renewal--and we have an obligation to do so. Fulfilling this obligation is in our own best interests, as well as the best interests of our students and of the society that supports us.

As with almost every higher education institution in this country, M-DCC's mission statement and goals prominently mention producing productive citizens and serving the community, yet too often not enough is done to bring these goals to life. Our students need to be ready and able to take up lives of informed citizenship. They should have an understanding of the idea of public good and a sustained desire to work toward achieving common ground and the common good. We know that a combination of practical and theoretical knowledge enhances the learning of students, and we know that our institution—our faculty, students, staff, and resources—has tremendous capacity to help build stronger communities. Service learning is an invaluable strategy that helps us bring life to our mission and goals. It also moves us along the path of being a truly engaged campus—one that builds and maintains genuine, on-going, meaningful partnerships with our community.

Service-learning at Miami-Dade Community College is but one of the examples of how the college is committed to its students and community. It does, however, provide the most striking example of M-DCC's commitment to make a difference in the lives of our students and community by focusing on the development of civic literacy. In the context of cognitive development theory, higher education is very good at moving students from the stage of dualism where knowledge is perceived as either white or black to that of relativism where varying opinions and points of view are acknowledged. We in higher education have become quite adept

at challenging students' biases, prejudices, and pre-formed values. We can move students along the cognitive development road to the point that they do acknowledge the existence of many questions. What we have failed to do very well is support the students' movement on to the highest level of cognitive development where they make a moral commitment to values and beliefs which are truly the result of their own thinking and processing of multiple information. The ability to be completely devoted to one's own values and principles and yet demonstrate tolerance of others with differing values only comes with higher order cognitive development, and service-learning provides an extremely effective teaching strategy for this to occur. We at Miami-Dade Community College agree with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s comments in *On Being a Good Neighbor* when he said, "One of the great tragedies of man's long trek along the highway of history has been the limiting of neighborly concern to tribe, race, class, or nation." We are doing everything we can with our service-learning activities to extend our concern beyond the traditional limits of an academic institution.

Figure 1: M-DCC Center for Community Involvement –Organizational Chart



* Faculty Coordinator has no reporting relationship to the program coordinator.

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